Kelly McParland: Singh's impossible promises can still hurt Trudeau

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Body

Justin Trudeau won the 2015 election riding a wave of promises he couldn't hope to keep. Jagmeet Singh, the leader of the New Democrats, must have been paying attention. The chances any government could afford the long list of spending initiatives it's dangling in front of voters are nil. But it really doesn't matter: the more successful he is at appealing to the utopian left, the worse it is for Trudeau.

The beginning of Singh's career as New Democratic Party leader was wobbly at best. Having won the job, he didn't seem sure what to do with it. He may have at last found his footing though, as an unabashed crusader against the dark forces of wealth and success. In Thursday's leaders' debate he barely completed a sentence in without squeezing in some damnation against the crime of achievement.

A New Democrat government would dedicate itself to vanquishing "the powerful interests," "the wealthiest corporations," "the wealthiest Canadians," or anyone else with the temerity to be prosperous. In the NDP camp it's taken for granted that any person or company with a spare dollar intends to put it to selfish use. Trudeau's Liberals "gave $14 billion away to the wealthiest corporations so they could buy corporate jets and limousines," he asserted. Add in $4.5 billion for the Trans Mountain pipeline and "that's almost $20 billion he committed to the wealthiest and most powerful."

The NDP leader is not hard-up himself, and his obvious success - as a child of immigrants who has built a rich and rewarding life for himself - suggests Canada can't be that bad at offering opportunities to get ahead to striving families like his own. Education and a work ethic seem to be the key. Nonetheless Singh clearly aims to galvanize that part of the left that thinks anyone who has done well for themselves must have cheated somehow and deserves to have their rewards taken away and shared out among others.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, right, speaks as Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, left, and Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, centre, take part during the Maclean's/Citytv National Leaders Debate in Toronto on Thursday, Sept. 12, 2019.

His platform consists of an array of big-budget spending promises that only the most financially uninformed could accept as realistic. An ambitious expansion of the health-care system to include "head to toe" coverage, including dental and hearing care, vision care, mental health treatment and a universal pharmacare plan. Caps on cellphone bills and tuition costs, no more interest charges on student loans and a shift to grants with an aim to phase out tuition altogether. A billion dollars a year for child-care programs, $5 billion for housing programs, $15 billion on climate change plans, a $3 billion climate bank, billions for Indigenous programs, including a pledge to ensure potable water no matter the cost.

It wouldn't all happen at once. The party says parts would be phased in, though pharmacare would be introduced by the end of next year. Singh has no idea what it would all cost - at least not that he's willing to confess. The

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Parliamentary Budget Officer says his new "super wealth tax" on Canadians worth more than $20 million would bring in about $7 billion a year on average over the first decade, which may sound like a lot but wouldn't begin to pay for the promises he's made. The Green party calculated the cost of dental and pharmacare alone as about $30 billion, which scared them off proposing full coverage themselves.

Thing is, it doesn't really matter. The promises don't have to be believable to have the desired effect, which is to lure back members of the faithful who defected to the Liberals in 2015. Trudeau's success demonstrated that voters on the left don't worry much about where the money's to come from, or dig too deeply into the details of the pledges candidates make. They assume the money can be found, even if it means swollen deficits or a burgeoning debt, and that anyone who says we can't afford it is either a liar, a skinflint, a greedy rich person, or perhaps all three.

That's one of the great things about embracing the left - glaring contradictions and the painfully obvious can just be ignored. Time and again it's been proven that punitive taxes on top earners never bring in the riches promised. The NDP has had numerous chances at the provincial level to build its social nirvana, without notable success. Yet the faithful never abandon their conviction that increased spending will automatically make things better, and that the money can be found without fatally undermining the economy that has to provide it.

Father Raymond J. de Souza: I am privileged - just like Jagmeet Singh(https://nationalpost.com/opinion/father-raymond-j-de-souza-i-am-privileged-just-like-jagmeet-singh?video_autoplay=true)

Jagmeet Singh picks up Justin Trudeau's playbook in next battle for hearts of Canada's left(https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/jagmeet-singh-picks-up-justin-trudeaus-playbook-in-next-battle-for-hearts-of-canadas-left)

John Ivison: It'll be Justin versus Jagmeet in the GQ election of 2019(https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/john-ivison-itll-be-justin-versus-jagmeet-in-the-gq-election-of-2019?video_autoplay=true)

Singh has absorbed that lesson as well. Both Green leader Elizabeth May and Conservative leader Andrew Scheer spent part of the debate screwing up their faces in disbelief at the stuff he said.

"Jagmeet, I had to listen to your absurdities, you're going to have to stop now," May chastised him at one point. "People can check, none of what he just said is true."

"You're just making things up. Try to stick to the facts," Scheer admonished at another.

The Tory leader raised Singh's ire when he almost casually noted that the NDP's opposition to new pipelines would mean fewer jobs for the steelworkers it claims to champion. Nor could Singh explain why the oil industry is a bad thing that should be shut down while the support of British Columbia's NDP government for its liquid natural gas industry is a good thing that deserves support.

But consistency, like practicality, doesn't matter. The New Democrat fan base has historically put more emphasis on principle than power. It lost its way when it briefly appeared, under Jack Layton, that it might actually have a shot at governing. Trudeau exploited that moment to lure away left-wing votes, but the more Singh can convince the faithful he's one of them, by pledging things he can't deliver, the greater his chance of bringing those stragglers back to the fold.

He won't be prime minister, but, again, it won't matter. Pureness of purpose is the heart of the matter. If Singh makes NDPers feel good about themselves again, it will be bad news for Trudeau.

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